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Doe Run will offer buyouts to 160 Herculanum homeowners

BY CHRIS CARROLL
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JEFFERSON CITY - The Doe Run Co. will offer buyouts to 160 homeowners in Herculanum who live near the nation's largest smelter, under an agreement reached late Thursday.

State officials announced at the end of a six-hour negotiating session with Doe Run that the company would take immediate action to buy 26 houses near the company's property where children younger than 6 live.

Next, on a timetable that has yet to be set, the company will offer buyouts to an additional 134 houses.

High levels of pollution from the 110-year-old smelter have been found in the streets, yards and houses of Herculanum, a city of 2,800 people situated 30 miles south of St. Louis.

Doe Run executives said the company would schedule a community meeting within the next two weeks to announce further details of the plan.

Gov. Bob Holden called Thursday's meeting of officials from federal and state environment agencies, state health agencies and executives of Doe Run. Holden did not attend the meeting.

The buyout area encompasses all of what was once central Herculanum. The area is bounded by the smelter on the east end of town, Joachim Creek and the company's smelter waste pile to the south, and Joachim Drive and Broadway to the north and east.

A man who lives in the buyout zone with his young granddaughter said the news came as a great relief after months of worry.

"I'm glad they thought enough of the children to get them out of this mess," said Dennis Shore, who lives on short street about two blocks from the smelter. A recent blood test



An aerial view of the Doe Run Company factory, smelter and slag pile clearly shows the proximity to the households in Herculanum.

(LAURIE SKRIVAN/P-D)

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showed his granddaughter, Madison, 3, had a blood-lead rate nearly doubling the federal government's threshold for lead poisoning.

But Shore said he wanted to hear more about the offer for the house where he has lived 25 years. Because of contamination, many Herculaneum houses are now valued at a fraction of what homeowners paid for them.

Stephen Mahfood, director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, said Doe Run and the state agreed to offer homeowners the "fair market value" for their properties but had not defined whether that meant the value of a house in Herculaneum, in a town without lead pollution or something in between.

Lead poisoning is most dangerous to young children, who can suffer reduced intelligence and other health problems.

A satellite map released Tuesday by the state Department of Health and Human Services showed that more than half of the children who live within a half-mile of the smelter had lead poisoning.

The buyout does not cover all the children living within a half-mile, but it covers most.

"This is a wonderful step forward, a needed response to a problem that will take a long time to solve, and we don't have that time for these children," said Pamela Walker, director of environmental public health for the department.

Carol Miller, a mother of children who have had lead poisoning, said she was crushed by the news that the buyout would exclude her. Miller and her family recently took a government offer of temporary relocation to a hotel while their house and yard were cleaned of lead contamination.

"I'm disappointed; I could cry," said Carol Miller, who lives on Thurwell Street. "I'm glad some of the kids are getting out, but it's not my family."

Over the years, Doe Run had purchased up to 80 other houses in the buyout zone.

The buyouts will be voluntary, but Mahfood said he would like to see all residents move from the area as soon as possible.

The buyout does not mean a letup in the ongoing, government-imposed cleanup of Herculaneum, he said. Doe Run must continue at full speed to replace contaminated soil at hundreds of houses and reduce emissions from the smelter.

"The remediation and cleanup effort will continue," he said. "Nothing has been given up and nothing is slowing down."

In recent weeks, Mahfood, Holden and House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt have discussed the possibility of temporarily shutting down the smelter or forcing Doe Run to buy out residents. Officials also have discussed putting Herculaneum on the Superfund priorities list as a way of forcing Doe Run to take stronger actions to clean up the lead.

In fact, earlier Thursday, Gephardt, D-St. Louis County, renewed his pressure. He said after meeting in Washington with EPA officials that he would support closing the lead smelter if the company didn't make progress in its environmental cleanup.

A spokeswoman for Doe Run said the company had done the right thing.

"We think we've come up with a very good plan to make things right," said Barbara Shepard, vice president of community relations.

Despite financial difficulties brought on by low lead prices and millions of dollars spent on cleanup activities, Doe Run will be able to afford the cost of the buyouts, Shepard said.

The company is negotiating with creditors to restructure its debt.

Also:

Gephardt plans to continue pressure on Doe Run, EPA